Ex-Japanese premier's killer jailed for life

NARA: The gunman charged with killing Japan's former prime minister Shinzo Abe was found guilty on Wednesday and jailed for life, as the judge declared the broad-daylight assassination "despicable and extremely malicious".

The shooting more than three years ago forced a reckoning in a country with little experience of gun violence, and ignited scrutiny of alleged ties between prominent conservative lawmakers and a secretive sect, the Unification Church.

As he handed down the sentence at a court in the city of Nara, judge Shinichi Tanaka said Tetsuya Yamagami, 45, had been "determined" to shoot Abe. The fact he "shot him from behind and did so when (Abe) was least expecting it" points to the "despicable and extremely malicious" nature of his act, he said.

Yamagami looked down and expressed little emotion during the sentencing for charges including murder and firearms control law violations, after he used a handmade gun to kill Japan's longest-serving leader during a campaign speech in July 2022.

The defence team of Yamagami — who had admitted to murder at the trial opening in October — told a press conference they had not yet decided whether to appeal, which under Japan's legal system must be done within two weeks.

In a statement to Japanese media, Abe's widow Akie urged Yamagami to "face up to what he has done and pay for the crime of taking the life of my precious husband". Prosecutors had argued that the defendant's motive to kill Abe was rooted in his desire to besmirch the Unification Church.

The months-long trial highlighted how his mother's blind donations to the church plunged his family into bankruptcy and how he came to believe "influential politicians" were helping the sect thrive. Abe had spoken at events organised by some of the church's groups.—AFP

S. Korea's former PM gets 23 years jail for martial law role

SEOUL: Former South Korean prime minister Han Duck-soo was sentenced to 23 years in prison on Wednesday for aiding and abetting a declaration of martial law that briefly suspended civilian rule and plunged the country into chaos.

The defendant "disregarded his duty and responsibility as prime minister until the very end", said Judge Lee Jin-gwan, of the Seoul Central District Court. "We sentence the defendant to 23 years in prison." The sentence is eight years longer than prosecutors demanded.

The 76-year-old career technocrat was ordered to report to prison immediately after the ruling. Judge Lee said the martial law decree by Han's boss Yoon Suk Yeol in December 2024 was intended with the "aim of subverting the constitutional order" and amounted to insurrection. Yoon's stunning imposition of martial law saw armed troops deployed to the National Assembly and the National Election Commission before it was vetoed by the opposition-led parliament. In the aftermath, Yoon was impeached and removed by the Constitutional Court in April, triggering an election two months later.

Han is one of many former officials — including Yoon — who have stood trial over their roles in the martial law attempt.—AFP

CIVILIANS gather with their weapons in Qamishli as Kurdish forces called upon "young Kurds, men and women" both within and outside Syria to "join the ranks of the resistance".—AFP

US starts moving 7,000 IS detainees from Syria to Iraq

Seven soldiers killed in a drone attack by Kurdish forces, says Damascus

WASHINGTON: The United States launched an operation on Wednesday that could ultimately transfer up to 7,000 detainees allegedly affiliated with the militant Islamic State (IS) group from Syria to neighbouring Iraq, the US military said.

The aim of the operation — which began with the movement of 150 alleged fighters — is to ensure the people "remain in secure detention facilities," US Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a post on X.

"We are closely coordinating with regional partners, including the Iraqi government," the post quoted CENTCOM commander Admiral Brad Cooper as saying. "Facilitating the orderly and secure transfer of ISIS detainees is critical to preventing a breakout that would pose a direct threat to the United States and regional security," Cooper added, using an alternate acronym for IS.

In a deal reached on Sunday that included a ceasefire and the integration of ethnic Kurds' administration into the state, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) chief Mazloum Abdi agreed that the government would take over responsibility for prisoners accused of being part of IS.

Thousands of detainees are held in seven prisons in northeast Syria, while tens of thousands of people thought to be their family members live in the Al-Hol and Roj camps.

The United States, which heads an international coalition that backed the Kurds against IS, said this week that the purpose of its alliance with the SDF had largely ended years after they defeated the armed group.

Washington now supports Syria's new Islamist political authorities — once commanders affiliated with the Al Qaeda armed group themselves — who are seeking to extend their control across the country after years of civil war.

Kurds accused of breaking truce

Syria's government said a drone strike by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces killed seven of its soldiers on Wednesday, though the SDF denied this, in an incident that threatens to derail a ceasefire after days of fighting in the northeast.

The Syrian army called the attack, which it said took place as soldiers were securing a captured military base containing explosives, a dangerous escalation.

The SDF, previously the main US ally in Syria, said it had not carried out a strike and that the blast had occurred when Syrian soldiers were moving explosives. It accused the Syrian army of violating the truce with attacks in several locations.

After days of rapid gains, the government on Tuesday said it had reached an understanding with the SDF for it to agree a plan over a four-day ceasefire to integrate into the central state, and that otherwise the SDF would face an assault on the two last main cities it holds.

The government advance against the SDF has put into doubt years of Kurdish de facto autonomy in the northeast and is significant for Syria's ties with the United States and Turkiye, and for the fate of thousands of detained Islamist militants.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, a main ally of Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa, said on Wednesday that the SDF, which it regards as a terrorist group, must lay down arms and disband now to avoid further bloodshed.—Agencies

Japan restarts world's biggest nuclear plant

KARIWA: The world's biggest nuclear power plant was restarted on Wednesday for the first time since the 2011 Fukushima disaster, its Japanese operator said, despite persistent safety concerns among residents.

The plant was "started at 19:02", Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) spokesman Tatsuya Matoba said of the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in Niigata prefecture. The regional governor approved the resumption last month, although public opinion remains sharply divided.

On Tuesday, a few dozen protesters — mostly elderly — braved freezing temperatures to demonstrate in the snow near the plant's entrance, whose buildings line the Sea of Japan coast.

"It's Tokyo's electricity that is produced in Kashiwazaki, so why should the people here be put at risk? That makes no sense," Yumiko Abe, a 73-year-old resident, said.

Around 60 per cent of residents oppose the restart, while 37pc support it, according to a survey conducted in September.

TEPCO said it would "proceed with careful verification of each plant facility's integrity" and address any issues appropriately and transparently. Kashiwazaki-Kariwa is the world's biggest nuclear power plant by potential capacity, although just one reactor of seven was restarted.

The facility was taken offline when Japan pulled the plug on nuclear power after a colossal earthquake and tsunami sent three reactors at the Fukushima atomic plant into meltdown in 2011.

However, resource-poor Japan now wants to revive atomic energy to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels, achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 and meet growing energy needs from artificial intelligence.—AFP

Railway safety questioned as Spain reels from train disasters

BARCELONA: Spain's railway system was under scrutiny on Wednesday after a commuter service crashed near Barcelona, days after at least 43 people were killed in a collision between two high-speed trains.

A train driver died and 37 people were injured — several seriously — in the latest incident late on Tuesday. The commuter train hit a retaining wall that fell onto the tracks in Gelida near Barcelona, regional officials said. Railway operator Adif said the wall likely collapsed due to heavy rainfall that has swept across Spain's northeastern region of Catalonia in recent days.

Spain was already reeling from Sunday's collision in the southern region of Andalusia, the country's deadliest rail accident in more than a decade. Another body was recovered on Wednesday at the site of the accident near the village of Adamuz, bringing the confirmed death toll to 43, authorities said.

"This is too much," the head of the conservative main opposition Popular Party, Alberto Nunez Feijoo, wrote on X. His party demanded an "immediate clarification" of the state of the nation's railways.

Speaking to reporters on Tuesday before the Barcelona-area crash, far-right party Vox's spokeswoman Pepa Millan said Spaniards were now "afraid to get on a train". Raluca Maria Pasca, a 45-year-old waitress, said she had noticed that high-speed trains "have been shaking lately".—AFP

Europe's far right, populists trying to distance themselves from Trump

BERLIN: European far-right and populist parties that once cheered on Donald Trump and gained in standing through his praise are now distancing themselves from the US president over his military incursion into Venezuela and bid for Greenland.

The Trump administration has repeatedly backed far-right European parties that share a similar stance on issues from immigration to climate change, helping legitimise movements that have long faced stigma at home but are now on the rise.

The new US National Security Strategy issued last month said "the growing influence of patriotic European parties indeed gives cause for great optimism." But those parties now face a dilemma as disapproval of Trump rises across the continent over his increasingly aggressive foreign policy moves and in particular his efforts to acquire Greenland from Denmark.

AfD berates Trump

"Donald Trump has violated a fundamental campaign promise namely, not to interfere in other countries," Alice Weidel of the far-right Alternative for Germany said, while party co-leader Tino Chrupalla rejected "Wild West methods".

The AfD has been cultivating ties with Trump's administration — but polls suggest this may no longer be beneficial. A survey by pollster Forsa released on Tuesday showed 71pc of Germans see Trump more as an opponent than an ally.

Wariness of Trump has grown since he vowed on Saturday to slap tariffs on a raft of EU countries including Germany, France, Sweden and Britain, until the US is allowed to buy Greenland. Those countries had last week sent military personnel to the vast Arctic island at Denmark's request.

National Rally leader Jordan Bardella said Europe must react, referring to "anti-coercion measures" and the suspension of the economic agreement signed last year between the EU and the United States. British populist party Reform UK, whose leader Nigel Farage has long feted his close ties with Trump, said it was hard to tell if the president was bluffing. "But to use economic threats against the country that's been considered to be your closest ally for over a hundred years is not the kind of thing we would expect," Reform said in a statement published on Jan 19.

Blunter still was Mattias Karlsson, often cited as chief ideologist of the far-right Sweden Democrats. "Trump is increasingly resembling a reversed King Midas," he wrote on X. "Everything he touches turns to shit." Political scientist Johannes Hillje said it would always be hard for nationalists to forge a common foreign policy "because the national interests do not always converge."

Keeping out of the fray

Not all European far-right and populist parties have been so critical. Some, like the far-right Dutch Party for Freedom and Spanish Vox, praised Trump for removing Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro yet kept silent on his Greenland threats.

Others, such as Polish President Karol Nawrocki and the nationalist government of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban have called for the issue of Greenland to be settled bilaterally between the United States and Denmark. Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis posted a video on social networks on Tuesday in which he brandished a map and a globe to show how big Greenland was and how close it was to Russia if it were to send a missile.—Reuters

NEWSMAKERS

FLORIDA (Chile): A firefighter carries a hose as he works to extinguish burning vegetation in a region ravaged by four days of deadly wildfires. Local authorities pleaded for help as entire towns and villages have been reduced to rubble.—AFP

MAPUTO: An aerial view shows residents wading through floodwater to cross a road near the Mozambican capital. Over 100 people have died since the rainy season began in early October, including 51 since Christmas Eve, when downpours intensified and sent torrents of river water crashing through several villages.—AFP

A RESEARCHER examines an ancient cave painting in a small island off Indonesia's Sulawesi region.—Reuters

World's oldest cave art discovered in Indonesia

PARIS: A red stencil of a hand pressed against the wall of an Indonesian cave is the oldest rock art ever discovered, scientists said on Wednesday, and sheds light on how humans first migrated to Australia.

The cave art dates back at least 67,800 years, according to research published in the journal *Nature* by a team of Indonesian and Australian archaeologists. "We have been working in Indonesia for a long time," study co-author Maxime Aubert of Australia's Griffith University said.

This time they ventured to caves on the island of Muna in the Sulawesi province on the advice of Indonesian archaeologist Adhi Agus Oktaviana, the study's lead author. There they found "handprints in negative, stencilled, probably using red ochre," Aubert said. The fingers of one of the hands were "retouched to become pointed like claws — a style of painting only seen in Sulawesi," the Canadian archaeologist added.

To determine the art's age, the team took five-millimetre samples from "cave popcorn", which are small clusters of calcite that form on the walls of limestone caves. Then they zapped the layers of rock with a laser to measure how the uranium decayed over time, compared to a more stable radioactive element called thorium.

This "very precise" technique gave the scientists a clear minimum age for the painting, Aubert explained.

At 67,800 years old, the Indonesian stencil is more than a thousand years older than other hand stencils found in a Spanish cave which has been attributed to Neanderthals.—AFP

NUUK: Snow-covered houses line a hillside as warm evening light casts its glow on a neighbourhood in Greenland's capital.—AFP

BOSTON (Massachusetts, US): Demonstrators take part in a nationwide "Stop ICE Terror" rally to protest alleged excesses committed by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement during its crackdown against immigrants.—AFP